

# Write Soon!

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**T**he aim of this regular feature in *The Reading Teacher* is to help teachers help parents in nurturing their children's reading development. Reading is the focus. As we all know, though, writing and reading go hand in hand. One becomes a better reader by writing, and one becomes a better writer by reading. In this month's column, we explore the nature of family writing and how families can take advantage of writing experiences to move their children to higher levels of literacy.

Writing, like reading, is learned best when it occurs in authentic situations and for authentic purposes. Fortunately, writing at home is an authentic task that parents and other family members engage in regularly. Writing is indeed a part of family life. Think of all the ways families use writing: shopping lists, quick informational notes to other family members, birthday and holiday cards and notes of affection dropped into lunch boxes and hidden underneath pillows on a bed, letters (and e-mail correspondence) sent to loved ones, scrap booking, and many more. Our job as educators is to help parents see these regular activities as opportunities for their children to write for real purposes, to make their lives easier, to make others happy, or to discover more about themselves through reflection.

In informational presentations to parents, we need to share with parents the importance of writing, its reciprocal relationship with reading, and how they can make writing a part of their family life and, in turn, nurture their own children's learning (Rasinski & Padak, 2004). In the sections below, we outline the types of writing that parents and children can integrate into family life.

## Types of Family Writing

### List Writing

List writing is ubiquitous in many families. Parents are always making to-do lists, shopping lists, invitation

lists, and the like. Written lists serve an important purpose in life—they help us remember things and get things done. Parents need to see the importance of written lists, to share their lists with their children, and to encourage children to make their own lists. These can range from birthday wishes, to chores, to a top-ten list of almost anything that appeals to children. Every day children can be asked to make a list of their activities for the day. Later in the evening, the list can be used for reflection—children and parents can go through the list, determine if it was realistic, and then even write about what was accomplished in a personal journal.

### Notes

One of Tim's (first author) fondest childhood memories was a brief note in his lunchbox from his mother wishing him a happy day or a note from his dad that was under his pillow. Parents are notorious note writers, whether reminders to themselves to get something done or notes for a family member placed on the kitchen bulletin board.

Parents can encourage children to take notes as well. Children can make reminders to themselves, write short notes to other family members, or make observations of the things they encounter in their lives. A great place to take notes is in a small spiral notebook that can fit into a back pocket. Children can jot down their thoughts and observations—the taste of the chocolate chip ice cream cone, feelings about saying goodbye to grandma and grandpa after a summer vacation, the thrill of an amusement park ride, and so on. These notes can later be the inspiration and source for more in-depth writing that may occur in school.

### Journals/Diaries

A personal journal or diary is a bit more formal than spontaneous notes—the writing is done in an actual

book, and the journal writer often adds to his or her journal regularly, often at a specific time of the day (e.g., near the end of the day, right before bed). When journaling, a child will often summarize and reflect on the significant events of the day. In the process of writing, journalers often come to deeper understanding of their lives. Moreover, the journal becomes a precious keepsake as the journaler continues through life. Journals make excellent presents and may launch a child into a lifetime of writing and reflection.

All writers, old and young, should keep personal journals. By keeping a journal of their own, moms or dads can help their children see how they make entries and how the journal can lead to deeper awareness and understanding.

### ***Dialogue Journals***

Dialogue journals are simply written conversations between two participants (a parent and a child) using a journal or notebook to carry on the conversation. The parent writes an entry into the notebook journal—to ask a question, provide an answer, or give or take advice. The journal is then delivered to the child's room, where he or she makes an entry the following day and returns the journal to the parent for the next set of entries.

Dialogue journals are wonderful ways for parents to develop a deeper relationship with their children. Questions, answers, encouragements, apologies, and words of affection are perfect to share with children in a dialogue journal. Children will learn to share more of themselves with their parents in this way. Moreover, since the parent models fluent writing in the journal entries, the child will improve his or her writing by emulating the words and written conventions the parent employed. Not only is a dialogue journal a vehicle for expressing oneself and getting to know one's child through writing, it also becomes a record of the child's relationship with his or her parent that will be cherished throughout the child's life.

### ***Letters and E-mails***

Throughout history, written communication through letters has been an important way for families to stay connected, even when separated. Today, this form of writing has become even more ubiquitous with the advent of e-mail and other forms of electronic

communication. In the same way that parents communicate in writing with family members not living in the same household, children too can be encouraged to write (or e-mail) to family members such as grandparents, cousins, and even parents who may be absent. The wonderful payoff to such writing is to get a letter in reply to one that the child has written.

### ***Birthday and Special Event Books***

Families usually honor a family member's birthday or other special day with gifts. One of the best gifts for anyone in a family, one that will be treasured for years to come, is a Birthday Book or Special Day Book. These are blank books in which family members and other guests at the child's birthday party—or any special event—are invited to share a kind thought, a special wish, or favorite memory of the special person. The book then becomes a significant gift for the child.

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### ***Parodies***

Parodies can be incredibly entertaining. They can also be enjoyable to create, especially written parodies or copy changes (Rasinski & Padak, 2004). Families can find great satisfaction in creating and sharing parodies, especially parodies of songs and poems for children. Writing a parody is not difficult; the text that is being parodied becomes a model or scaffold for the writer to use in creating his or her own version of the text.

The key to writing a parody is to see the underlying structure to the text and help the child use that structure to create his or her own. For example, to write a new version Yankee Doodle, the child needs to change what Yankee rode to town on. If Mr. Doodle comes to town on a llama, the poem might read this way:

Yankee Doodle went to town riding on a llama  
Across the mountains, and over the plains  
And went to see his mama.

Children and parents can spend quality time together writing and then performing parodies. By using the structure of the original poem, parody writing

is easy to do. Yet, at the same time, parody writing challenges children to think of content, word choice, rhyming, and rhythm in language, all areas important to becoming a literate person.

## Tips to Share With Parents

We know, from our own family experiences, that writing makes a difference in our children's and our own lives. When introducing writing to parents, some basic principles, learned through hard experience, are worth sharing with parents and family members as we ask them to use writing as an integral part of their families' lives:

- The writing must be authentic. Both parents and children need to see writing as serving a real purpose that goes beyond simply learning to write.
- Although mechanics in writing are important, the essential element in writing is communication of one's thoughts and ideas. Tell parents not to be overly concerned with spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors. Pointing out children's shortcomings will discourage them from writing. If parents write with their children, the children will begin to use their parents' writing (including mechanics) as a model for their own writing.
- Writing should be a regular family routine. Children need to learn that writing in their families is part and parcel of family life.

- A variety of materials is necessary for writing—paper and writing instruments for sure, but also construction paper for book covers, colored markers, staplers, and the like.

Children's trade books can provide wonderful examples of authentic and purposeful family writing. Be sure to share some of these books with parents when speaking to them about family writing. One of our favorites is *Dear Annie* by Judith Caseley (1994), a story that chronicles the relationship between a grandfather and his granddaughter Annie through their written correspondence. Stories like this one can be a powerful tool for convincing parents about the importance of family writing.

Writing is fundamental to the development of a fully literate person. Writing can also be essential to the development of families. As teachers we need to do whatever we can to encourage families, parents and their children, to make writing an integral part of their family's life.

## References

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## Literature Cited

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